

Castlemaine Naturalist

February 2018

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Monthly newsletter of the
Castlemaine Field Naturalists Club Inc.



Powerful Owl chick with parent, Oct 30th CBG –
photo Noel Young. See article p. 6

Challenge Bird Count 2017 – preliminary results

By Chris Timewell

On the first weekend in December, teams across Australia aim to record as many bird species and individuals as possible within a 25km radius area as part of the Challenge Bird Count. Members and friends of Castlemaine Field Naturalists Club have participated in the Count since at least the early 2000s. Our 25km radius search area is centred on the middle of Castlemaine town – and therefore effectively takes in the whole of the Mount Alexander Shire.

There are a few simple rules to follow. For example, for a bird to be recorded, it must be seen by at least 2 people or heard by at least 3 people. For each group within a team, the surveys must be undertaken across no more than a single calendar day – between 12.00am to 11.59pm. A team can be made up of multiple groups looking at different parts of their search area, but each group must have at least one experienced birdwatcher.

The news reports leading up to the first weekend in December were full of dire weather forecasts. On its way were storms, rainfall and flooding not seen since the days of Noah. Unlike this fabled collector of animal specimens, all bar one of the groups making up the Castlemaine team decided to wait for the rain to pass and commence their birding observations on the following days. (In the end, the rain didn't live up to expectations over the weekend, at least not on the scale that was predicted.)

Fantastically, the Castlemaine team comprised seven separate groups comprising 22 people. This included a group made up of Muckleford Valley Landcare members. A large number of locations were covered including the Botanic Gardens, Warburton's Bridge, Mount Tarrengower, golf courses, local creeks (Forest, Barkers and Campbells), Sutton Grange, the Nuggetty range, Cairn Curran, Guildford, Newstead and other locations. Thank you to everyone that participated.

From all the Castlemaine groups combined, 107 different bird species were detected and 1701 individual birds. This is well up on the 84 species seen in 2016, but still below the record of 135 species detected in 2001 across the Castlemaine

district. Some of the highlights from 2017 included two separate families of three Powerful Owls, a White-backed Swallow and three Southern Whiteface at Baringhup, a pair of Leaden Flycatchers at Mount Tarrengower and a Scarlet Honeyeater at the botanic gardens. Encouragingly, there was only one Starling and six Mynahs seen across all groups, and only two locations with House Sparrows. Some of the species not seen or heard this year were Black Swans, Straw-necked Ibis, White-necked Heron, Tree Martins, White-browed Woodswallows, Restless Flycatchers and Rufous Songlarks.

A full list of species from the 2017 Challenge Count, and comparisons with past years, will be provided in a future article.

The Week Before Christmas

Nigel Harland

You will probably remember a violent storm which occurred during the week before Christmas. The rain came down horizontally, not registering much in the rain gauge, but considerable nonetheless. Where we live, in Sutton Grange, many trees came down, some were snapped off mid-trunk, the like of which I have never seen before.

Fortunately none came down on our house, but many large branches were snapped off and landed nearby. One was fairly close to the house and in the process of falling; it had killed a Sulphur-crested Cockatoo. I was very sad at seeing the outcome, but my sadness paled into insignificance.

Another Cockatoo, perhaps the partner or maybe an offspring, sat on a branch nearby. It rarely moved and never called. Every day I looked and every day it was still there. Sometimes it had moved slightly, but it maintained its vigil. Christmas came and went, but the Cockatoo remained until I found that it had been taken by a fox (presumably).

I don't often cry at scenes of natural events, but the tears flowed on this occasion.



Membership fees for 2018

At the 2017 Annual General Meeting, our Treasurer Geoff Harris reported that income over the previous two years had not been sufficient to cover the costs of running the club. Cost increases include printing and postage, and hire of the hall. As reported in the December *Castlemaine Naturalist*, your committee has therefore accepted the Treasurer's recommendation for an increase in some fees for 2018.

The following motion will be put to members at the first General meeting on Friday February 9th :

That the full membership fees be raised to \$35 (Single) and \$50 (Family), and that the concession fees remain unchanged at \$25 (single) and \$30 (Family).

Following the decision on this motion, membership renewal notices will be sent with the March newsletter.

Annual General Meeting 2018

The 2018 AGM will be held at 7.30 pm on Friday 9th **March**, and will be followed by the first General Meeting for 2018, at which the speaker will be Carol Hall.

The AGM Agenda will include reports from the President and Treasurer, and elections for the 2018 Committee. **Members are strongly encouraged to consider standing for the committee.** Nomination forms are being distributed with the February newsletter, and are available from the Secretary.

Welcome New Members

We would like to extend a warm welcome to new members John Britten, Patrese Hosking, Tiffany Inglis, Chris Cook and Alison Pouliot and a special welcome back to returning members Margaret Panter, Eileen Park and Beris Perry. We look forward to sharing and learning more about our amazing natural world with you.

Encouraging young Naturalists

CFNC supports the environmental education program at Castlemaine Secondary College through the provision of two prizes, currently worth \$75 each, awarded at the end of each school year.

Students eligible for the awards must be enrolled in VCE, and must display excellent participation in environmental activities, awareness and application of environmental activities, awareness and appreciation of environmental issues, as well as academic application and excellence.

The winners for 2017 are **Rainer Cook-Tonkin and Hetty Moysey.**

Both students have studied VCE Outdoor and Environmental Studies and have the highest assessment average for the year. In addition, both students have been volunteers on Mittagundi programs and have also been active in the 'movement against Adani.'

The convenors of the CSC's Awards program have expressed the School's thanks to CNFC for our ongoing support of CSC and its students.

The Birds of Sutton Grange

Nigel Harland

A while ago, Chris Timewell wrote an article recalling a monthly article by Susannah Starr on The Birds of Sandon. As a result, I have decided to write a similar piece each month on the Birds of Sutton Grange. The list will be of the birds seen on or from our property.

Red Wattlebird
Yellow-tufted Honeyeater
New Holland Honeyeater
Sulphur-crested Cockatoo
Long-billed Corella
Crimson Rosella
Red-rumped Parrot
Spotted Pardalote
Tree Martin
Welcome Swallow
Galah
White-browed Scrubwren
Superb Fairy Wren
Australian Raven
Wedge-tailed Eagle
Grey Shrikethrush
Willie Wagtail
Yellow-faced Honeyeater
Red-browed Finch
Common Bronzewing
Eastern Rosella
Musk Lorikeet



Most of these are long term residents, some come and go and some are rarities – like the Musk Lorikeet this month. One point to note is the lack of raptors. In the days of rabbits, I used to see perhaps ten different raptors on a regular basis, compared to just one this time.

January – February Observations

From "Wildlife" January and February 1948 i.e 70 years ago

George Broadway

"Wildlife" commenced in 1938. Were people still asking the same questions ten years later ?

INSECTS

Warracknabeal. Vine Hawk Moth caterpillar, beginning to pupate. Can be very destructive on grape-vines. Also Wesley Vale.

Hobart : Anthelid Moth larva, a "Woolly Bear" type. Do not know what it would have been doing in a sparrows nest.

Brighton: Rove beetle. The orange band was the wing covers which are much reduced and worn like epaulettes.

Nedlands: Drinker Moth caterpillar. *Pinara ferveus*. One we have seen before.

Osbornes Flat: Rose Chafers. Up to no good, they feed on roses. Arsenate of Lead recommended.

Hunter: Introduced Pumpkin Beetle, *Aulacophora hiliaris*. Probably eating the leaves rather than sucking the sap. Arsenate of Lead again.

Caulfield: Flying termites. They may have come from the firewood, but if from the timber of the shed they may have made their home in it. Suggested removal of part of the doorpost and if infested the use of creosote and kerosene.

Wonthaggi: Mottled Cup moth larvae, *Doratifera vulnerans*. Known to children as Chinese Junks, they may be present in millions on Eucalypts, completely defoliating some. Studies show that the trees always recover.

Murrabit: Water-tiger, the larva of a water beetle. Has large sickle-shaped jaws and preys on smaller creatures.

Port Fairy: Longicorn woodboring beetle, *Macrones purpureipes*, Imitates a large wasp, with a slender body with a bulbous tip. The wing covers have a transparent centre. The adult beetle is found in Summer on Tea-tree and Bursaria.

Hay: Eggs found on a Cassia (Senna) plant, had already hatched. Apparently some kind of bug which would feed on Cassia.

Stratford: Cocoons of a common little braconid wasp, which parasitises hairy caterpillars. When the wasp grubs have eaten the whole of the caterpillar from the inside they spin their cocoons around it.

Geelong: A sap sucking plant bug with two horns on the shoulders. No common name.

Horsham: Vine Hawk Moth caterpillar. (See above). The "eyes" near the front and the "sting" at the tail are merely bluff.

Albert Park: The green Cicada which makes a lot of noise on Summer days. The brown shell was the nymphal shell of the same insect. Actually the green one came out of the brown one and not the other way round.

SPIDERS

Kangaroo Flat: the not very common Triangular Spider, *Arcys clavigera*. Apparently undergoing the process of Ecdysis or skin-changing. By the time it arrived in the office the old skin was neatly tucked in one corner of the box.

(Not to be found in any of my spider books)

Red-back Spider, *Latrodectus hasseltii*. A female, not fully grown. More likely to be feeding on one of its brothers or sisters at that stage.

Yarram: Male Red-headed Trapdoor spider, with abdomen of turquoise blue. Strange for it to turn up in Yaram, it is much more common north of the divide.

Merrylands: Remains of male nephila spider after having been dined on by the female.



Thanks to the Australian Museum for the photo of the Triangular Spider above

Another successful breeding season for the Powerful Owls

Noel Young

In the spring of 2016 a pair of Powerful Owls raised one chick basically within the Castlemaine Botanical Gardens. (See CN#449 December 2016)

They returned to try again this spring, when they emerged from an unknown nest site to appear with two flying young in late October. A photo of this discovery by Peter Turner was in the November CN.

Over the next couple of months an increasing number of interested spectators including myself followed their progress. One of the first things that was remarked upon was that only one adult has tended the two chicks, as opposed to the previous season when two adults were looking after one chick. Nevertheless, both chicks seemed to thrive until dispersal in January, when as far as I know they are off hunting for themselves.

No doubt the CBG offers good pickings for these large predators, and though their favourite meal of Ringtail Possums may have gotten a bit scarce, they were seen to make do with Magpies and on at least one occasion a Moorhen.

The adult Owl often holds onto a catch through the day, and feeds at dusk before hunting. When this was the case the young chicks would be seen to harass the sleepy adult toward the end of the day, and I was

lucky on one occasion to witness a feeding session in broad daylight (before 6pm) which allowed easy photography. Having said that, the Owls always make it as difficult as possible for photographers by installing themselves near the top of very high trees, often separated from each other. They seem to pick trees that are accessible for a large bird, but with good overhead cover to minimise harassment by other birds during the day. On more than one occasion a Currawong was witnessed protesting their presence.

It is a privilege to see such a rare species persisting in a place which at times is very noisy, and putting up with their celebrity status with patience and perseverance.



One of the two downy chicks high in a Stone Pine on 30th October



Anticlockwise from above:
 The proud parent
 Keeping one eye on an active chick Oct 30
 Early breakfast (6pm) of possum on November 8th
 The two youngsters on 15th November
 One of the juveniles nearing adult plumage – seen in the Stone Pine on 24th January



Observations from Barkers Creek

Geraldine Harris

November 2017

Last November 2017 Richard Piesse and I spent a morning searching for a new stand of White (or Fringed) Everlastings *Chrysocephalum baxteri* which Philip and Judy Hopley had discovered in the Old Coach Road area (see Richards Observations in the December 2017 newsletter).

At our first stop we failed to find a known patch of these beauties but instead found two shovelled areas where someone had removed a shallow layer of indigenous plants. It is always disappointing to come across such illegal removal of native flora.

After some time enjoying the diversity of plants in flower we returned to the task-in-hand and following Judy and Phil's excellent directions with Richard's amazing knowledge of the area we were delighted to discover the new stand of White/Fringed Everlasting (see photos below).



December 2017

Dec 24. On Christmas eve Geoff was out walking, and noticing some feathers and then recognising an eagle feather. He looked more purposefully and found a young injured Wedge-tailed eagle on the ground unable to lift off and fly away. Some hours later the young bird was eventually bundled carefully into a blanket and box and taken by members of the Wildlife Rescue team for assessment and further action. It was suspected that the bird had an injured femur or knee and it was subsequently taken to the Hepburn Wildlife Shelter. We suspect it is one of our two young eagles.

P.S. The young eagle underwent a four hour operation to treat a broken femur and we are pleased to report that last we heard it was progressing well.

Dec 27. Ravens are in abundance at Barkers Creek. Large groups have been gathering in the trees around our house calling for long periods. On December 27 Geoff estimated at least 80 birds in trees half way down to the creek towards the freeway.

Dec 29. 12 red-rumped parrots, 10 Red-browed Finches 2 Peaceful Doves and 2 White-browed Babblers feeding on "lawn" of weeds and some native grasses at the back of our house.

After 40mls of rain in half an hour - White Gum Hill swathes of brown silt/soil on hill washed down onto golden grass lower down in the paddock like icing onto a cake - visual evidence of erosion of what little topsoil there is.

Dec 30. Geoff took photos of Red lined Geometrid Moth *Crysiphona acultaria* in grass.

January 2018

Jan 1. Common Cassinia *Cassinia aculeata* in flower in the bush and spreading down the valley.

18/1/18 Early morning - noted a Crested pigeon nestled into dry earth on edge of sprinkler spray with White-browed Babblers and Red-browed Finches. We were amused by the pigeon as it slowly and repeatedly raised and spread first its right wing, and then its left, to catch a light cooling spray from the sprinkler - almost dance-like.

Hot afternoon - Choughs crowded around bird bath and Magpie adult with young bird nearby waiting under swallows nests for young swallows succumbing to the heat and falling as prey during heat of the afternoon.

After dark in evening - Perron's tree frogs and Marbled Gecko on windows catching insects.

Our congratulations to Ian Higgins on his recent Landcare award

Ian spoke to the club on November last on the subject of invasive Needlegrasses. An article in Landcare magazine describes his activities in some detail. This is a brief extract:

"Ian Higgins' early interest in native plants has continued through his life. He developed a remarkable knowledge of indigenous flora species, their propagation and revegetation, leading to a 30-year professional career during which he has contributed significantly to revegetation and environmental planning in Victoria, in both professional and voluntary capacities.

....he was principal architect of, and major contributor to, VicVeg Online, the website that helps Victorians plan revegetation and restoration projects through understanding indigenous plant species and their relationship to local landscapes.

In 2000, Ian was an instigator of the Friends of Campbells Creek Landcare Group. With 72 financial members, the group is stronger than ever. Capitalising on Ian's early work and under his guidance, the group has transformed Campbells Creek into a richly biodiverse community asset..."

Bird Quiz

Nigel Harland

The bird featured last month was the Mistletoebird and indeed it is the bird which is responsible for spreading mistletoe from branch to branch and from tree to tree. Early in my Australian birding career I was told that it always sat sideways on a branch and I just laughed. My laughter was misplaced as it sits sideways so that its droppings fall on the branch and thus spreads the mistletoe. It is the only Australian representative of the Flowerpecker family which is much more common in more northern parts.

The bird for this month is shown below.



Our speaker for February will be Euan Moore

Euan Moore is the current president of the Victorian National Parks Association (VNPA), a not for profit environmental NGO that aims to improve the level of protection for Victoria's natural environment, fauna and flora.

This talk will briefly cover the history of the VNPA and then move on to the state of the environment in Victoria and to some current major issues. Closest to home is the current Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (VEAC) inquiry into the western Victorian Forests including Cobaw, Wellsford, Wombat and Pyrenees forests and logging plans for western Victoria.

VALE DR COLIN OFFICER

It is with sadness that I report that Colin passed away recently. He had a considerable reputation as a conservationist and was a well known name in that sphere. He had been a member of the club for several years since moving to Castlemaine from Broadford. Unfortunately we had not seen very much of him recently, the years having taken their toll.

There is a long article written by him in the "Castlemaine Naturalist" of August 2012 which gives an account of his work as a naturalist and conservationist. In recognition of his efforts in the Broadford area, a nature reserve there is named in his honour. However I did have to chide him for encouraging the Gazanias on his nature strip.

Colin also joined the committee of "Kaweka" but unfortunately due to advancing years his contribution was limited.

It is sad that we must add his name to the list of valued members of the club who have left us.

G. Broadway

Some observations by Richard Piesse over the summer

Late November – a Nankeen night Heron under Princes Pier at Port Melbourne.

Christmas eve – a pair of Peregrine Falcons along the cliff-tops at Jan Juc.

Seven km. long silt jetties at the mouth of the Mitchell River flowing into Lake King.

A brown wallaby "on guard" at a gateway into a forested area.

An Echidna burrowing into roadside gravel.

Lots of Ibis on the Gippsland dairy properties.

Pelicans sailing along the Mitchell River.

Black Swans in a canal on the outskirts of Paynesville.

Grey Butcherbirds on the shores of Lake King; in Burke Road east Kew; on the Yarra flats at Heidelberg; Merri Ck valley, Yarra Bend Park.

And plants in flower on January 10th at Forests and Como Reserves west of Bairnsdale:

Leptospermum phyllicoides

Banksia integrifolia

Wahlenbergia stricta

Dampiera stricta

Cassinia longifolia

Hibbertia obtusifolia

Lomandra longifolia

Bursaria spinosa

Tricoryne elatior

Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in this newsletter are those of the contributors and not necessarily those of the club

Castlemaine Field Naturalists

Coming events

Fri February 9 meeting: speaker EUAN MOORE of VNPA

Sat February 10 field trip: Mt. Macedon. Richard Piesse and George B

Mon February 12: Roadside clean-up.

9 a.m. start at cnr. Golf Links road on Pyrenees Highway – organiser Geoff Harris

Takes 1 – 2 hrs., Wear sturdy footwear and gloves. Garbage bags and reflective vests will be supplied. Please note KABC rules prohibit anyone under 16 from working on the roadside.

Fri March 9 meeting: AGM. speaker CAROL HALL on Geo-botany (the influence of geology on vegetation)

VISITORS ARE WELCOME AT CLUB ACTIVITIES

General meetings - (second Friday of each month, except January) are held in the Uniting Church (UCA) Hall (enter from Lyttleton St.) at 7.30 pm.

Field Trips - (Saturday following the general meeting) leave from the car park opposite Castle Motel, Duke Street at 1.30pm sharp unless stated otherwise. BYO morning and/or afternoon tea. Outdoor excursions are likely to be cancelled in extreme weather conditions. There are NO excursions on total fire ban days.

Business meetings - third Thursday of each month, except December, at George Broadways; 24a Greenhill Ave., at 6.00 pm. Members are invited to attend.

Club website (Web master: Chris Timewell) - <http://castlemainefnc.wordpress.com/>

Subscriptions for 2017

Ordinary membership: Single \$30, Family \$40

Pensioner or student: Single \$25, Family \$30

Subscription includes postage of the monthly newsletter, Castlemaine Naturalist

2017 Committee

President:	George Broadway	5472 2513
Secretary:	Peter Turner	5470 6891
Treasurer:	Geoff Harris	0418 392183

Nigel Harland	5474 8246	Richard Piesse	0448 572 867
Sue Albert,	Dianne Thompson	Noel Young (Editor)	5472 1345

[email newsletter material to: noelyoung@outlook.com.au]

**Castlemaine Field Naturalists Club Inc. PO Box 324, Castlemaine, 3450.
Inc #A0003010B**